



YOUNG VOTERS and the WEB of POLITICS

Pathways to Participation in the Youth Engagement and Electoral Campaign Web

W. Lance Bennett and Mike Xenos *

University of Washington

*mxenos@u.washington.edu

<http://depts.washington.edu/ccce/Home.htm>

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which youth engagement sites (such as Rock the Vote) and election campaign sites (for house, senate and governor) appeal to young voters and offer them pathways for involvement in the electoral process. We examined archival web records of candidate and youth engagement sites in the 2002 elections for the nature and frequency of appeals to young citizens on various issues, as well as interactive communication features that enable visitors to different sites to communicate and stay involved. The ways in which young citizens can travel within the youth sphere and across the two spheres are also examined through detailed analysis of site links, and the presence or absence of features on youth engagement sites that may help visitors search for campaigns that match their political preferences. The general findings suggest that there is much more that both campaigns and youth engagement organizations can do to attract young citizens and assist them in finding meaningful paths to voting. Campaigns still offer relatively few appeals directly to young voters, compared, for example, to appeals to senior citizens. And there are no links out from campaigns to the sphere of youth engagement sites, missing opportunities to connect voting to surrounding political experiences in society. As for the youth engagement sphere, there is surprisingly little observable cooperation among the various sites established by foundations and NGOs, resulting in missed opportunities to create interest networks among young citizens. Our network mapping analysis shows that the existing networks of youth sites could be much more easily traveled; the experience is more commonly that of isolated, proprietary islands. Though some groups are making attempts to reach out to other sites within the youth web sphere, we believe that a good deal more linking, as well as more prominent placement of links pages, would better enable youth engagement groups to successfully tap the networking power of the internet. Perhaps more importantly, there were no observed efforts to match the youth oriented political preferences that are clearly signaled in the youth engagement sites with specific electoral campaigns that may make similar issue appeals in the election sphere. What currently pass for pathways from youth engagement sites to election sites are links to voter registration information and to generic search engines (such as that run by the League of Women Voters) that only provide general lists of campaigns and candidates by geographic region. The potential of the web to create hyperlinked pathways between these two political spheres -- or even within the youth engagement sphere-- has not as yet been developed. At present, young people cannot travel easily in the political web sphere.

The crisis of youth participation in American politics has become well known. The low voter turnout rates for 18 to 25 year olds, compared to those of the rest of the population, stand atop the list of youth engagement concerns. Since achieving the franchise in 1972, voter turnout among the youth has steadily declined (Levine and Lopez 2002), and research on political socialization suggests that rates of participation (and political apathy) established during the early years of adulthood more often than not translate into lifelong patterns (Crystal & DeBell 2002; Putnam, 2000).

On the optimistic side, however, there is some indication that a distinct new generation of citizens may be entering public life. Called the DotNets by the authors of a Pew/CIRCLE report on the civic health of the nation, these young Americans born after 1976 differ from their Generation X predecessors in terms of strong collective identification as a generation, more positive attitudes about the role of government, and greater appreciation of diversity (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins, 2002). And yet the voting profile of this generation continues the path of historic decline, pushed perhaps, by the failure of candidates and campaigns to ask these young citizens to vote on terms that matter to them. As young Americans point to a lack of attention to youth concerns by political elites as a key factor in non-participation, and political campaigns (under the direction of professional consultants) expend energy on demographic groups with much higher turnout rates, the situation has become a vicious circle.

It is tempting to look toward the internet and other digital technologies for solutions to these problems, given the tech-savvy nature of our current younger generation, and the recent high-profile Web strategies deployed by presidential candidates in 2004. However, our analysis of political web content related to campaigns and elections available to young citizens in 2002 suggest that despite notable areas of progress, the potentials of the Internet as a crucible for greater youth participation have yet to be fulfilled.

In this study, we conducted comprehensive content analyses on archival copies of political engagement sites aimed at young people (e.g. RockTheVote.org) and campaign sites produced by candidates, collected during the 2002 U.S. elections. We also conducted network analyses of the live youth engagement Web sphere after the 2002 elections.

The major sites in the Youth Engagement Web Sphere tackled issues important to young people (including many of the top issues identified by most Americans), and deployed sophisticated interactive features and techniques. However, most did not feature comprehensive menus of information to organize those political issues. Perhaps more importantly, we found that sites within the youth engagement web sphere could dramatically improve their usage of the internet as a networking tool by following the lead of other political coalitions that more aggressively utilize and encourage the linking of sites affiliated with organizations working toward similar goals. We also found a lack of passageways leading from these youth political portals to candidates and campaigns that might help young voters match their interests to particular campaigns. On the election campaign side of the internet divide, House, Senate, and Gubernatorial candidates, addressed a number of topics and issues young people care about, but were much more likely to frame those issues for older rather than younger voters on their web sites -- despite the fact that close to four times as many young people use the internet compared to seniors. Campaign sites also used interactive features significantly less often than the sites in the Youth Engagement Web Sphere.

Our network analyses show that the youth web sphere operates well below its potential as a network. Though some sites do take advantage of the ease with which hyperlinks can help build online coalitions and dynamic virtual political space, we find that many do not prominently display links to other youth engagement websites, and even more do not feature such links at all. Rather than providing ways for visitors to move freely from one youth site to another, some site producers in the youth engagement arena seem to aspire to be one-stop-shopping destinations for young people seeking political information. Given that the youth organizations do not directly compete with one another, and each works toward the

public good of increasing youth political participation, this pattern reveals a great, unrealized potential of the networking and coordination capacities of web communication. By looking to the example of other vibrant political networks on the web, we believe site producers in the youth web sphere could dramatically improve their reach and effectiveness in delivering their content to young people.

From the perspective of a would-be young voter in 2002, our analyses suggest that going online to gather political information on upcoming elections could have been much more effective and rewarding. In the 2004 election cycle, the presidential primary campaigns raised significant interest in the mobilizing capacities of the Internet, particularly for younger voters. Though initial signs are somewhat positive, it remains to be seen whether youth sites will reach their full capacity to network with one another and also to pass young voters more intelligently into the election sphere. Replication of our analyses in future elections will tell whether or not the thousands of campaigns with web presences in each election will better utilize their technological capacity to be more appealing to young citizens.

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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